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ABSTRACT

A British project explored ways further education colleges could help meet training needs of small businesses, specifically the small plant and tool hire industry. The industry's leading organization, the Hire Association of Europe (HAE), provided a list of members; responsibility for making contact rested with the colleges. The most effective initiatives used the HAE's organizational structure and good-will to establish personal contacts. Face-to-face contact was more effective than mailed questionnaires in identifying employer training needs. Study participants agreed that an effective approach to marketing would be based on a centrally controlled marketing operation with the HAE as its focal point. Lessons learned from designing the learning program were that: (1) the problems of small student numbers and flexible delivery systems required innovative approaches; (2) content should reflect clients' needs; and (3) customization was essential. Special concerns in delivering the learning opportunities included location and scheduling, integration of workplace and college learning, college access to equipment and facilities, and cost. Role options open to colleges were as a supplement to on-the-job training, manager of learning and assessment, organizer of consortia of employers, assessment center, and trainer of trainers. Industry supplied training unique to the company and identified skill shortages. (YLB)

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Higher Skills

A case study of the role of further education colleges in meeting the training needs of the small plant and tool hire industry

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Higher Skills

A case study of the role of further education colleges
in meeting the training needs
of the small plant and tool hire industry

Further Education Unit

Foreword

In 1987, the Hire Association of Europe started on a road which was to lead to a new range of qualifications specifically designed for people working in our industry. We did this because we believe that by training to high standards of competence we shall immeasurably improve our service to our customers, increase the satisfaction of our employees and improve our business performance.

We are grateful for the help and support which we have received from the Training Agency, and so it gave our members additional pleasure in acting as the host industry in this case study.

The report reveals problems but also identifies exciting opportunities. It is hoped that readers of the report find it useful in suggesting ways whereby employers and colleges might work co-operatively in planning and delivering training to employees working in small organisations. I feel sure that, by taking part in the study, we have strengthened our links with the world of further education and we look forward to even closer links in the future.

M. Jenkins

Chair, Project Steering Group

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Introduction

Access to vocational education and training opportunities for people working in small firms has always presented difficulties. Small employers often lack the resources, the time or skilled trainers to undertake the training in house. Nevertheless, their training needs are real and require to be satisfied.

This project, funded by the Training Agency Work-Related Further Education Development Fund, was undertaken in order to explore and identify the potential involvement of colleges of further and continuing education in satisfying the training needs of small firms, when these training needs are articulated in terms of competence-based qualifications. The work was carried out by BGM Consultants Ltd for The Hire Association of Europe. The project was one of a number of related pieces of work funded by the Training Agency to which the Further Education Unit was granted access and to which it afforded support through its officers.

It is based upon a study of the small plant and tool hire industry and was managed by the industry's lead body, the Hire Association of Europe. It is recognised that the study reflects the characteristics and experiences of one particular industrial sector – the hire industry: Nevertheless, there is no doubt that many of the findings are relevant to other sectors.

It is sometimes assumed that large companies will often provide in house for their training needs, but that small businesses will tend to rely on other providers, including further education colleges, to meet their requirements. The experience of this project is that colleges will need to make considerable efforts if they are to interest small employers in providing for their training needs, let alone meet them.

The project also raises issues concerning the role of industry in the provision of vocational education and training. Assuming a commitment to training from the industry, to what extent does that commitment extend to employer organisations planning for and offering training opportunities for employees?

The report suggests that it would be helpful if employer organisations did take some responsibility for co-ordinating the training needs of members. Although it may be appropriate for a college to market itself and its courses and to discuss with industrial clients what they want and how they want it delivered, it is questionable whether it is effective in terms of time and money to have to undertake the same exercise with each outlet of the industry.

The development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) has enabled industry to specify more clearly what training it requires, and the potential providers are not only further education colleges. In many instances, industry will be able to meet some needs itself. In this way, the market-place for training becomes fragmented. A consequence of this is that, just as industry would want training at economical rates, a college will have to consider what is cost-effective for it to provide. Industry might wish to consider 'packages' which are attractive to colleges rather than to offer only those parts of the training process which it finds itself unable or unwilling to provide.

The findings of the project suggest, not surprisingly, that both colleges and employers must make considerable efforts if the required training is to be realised. It is also clear that, as all buyers and providers of training are becoming increasingly cost-conscious, cost-effective strategies must be found for providing for small numbers of trainees.

In some cases, because of the small numbers of potential trainees nationally, national agreements which designate colleges might be preferable.

This study contributes to the continuing debate concerning the infrastructure necessary to be in place in order to implement an effective vocational education and training system.

Nick Brewster
Development Officer
FEU

John Fox
Senior Training Adviser
Training Agency

Background

The Hire Association of Europe

The Hire Association of Europe represents a large section of the hire industry in the UK; the small plant and tool hire industry which is the subject of the case study is one of its important divisions. The total labour force in the industry, including non-members of the Association, is estimated at close to 35,000 employees and there are several large organisations involved, at least one operating internationally. Much of the hire industry however consists of small businesses or small local units of larger businesses, widely scattered geographically and catering mainly for the construction industry and the well-known but less significant DIY market.

The industry is organised nationally under the Association with a full-time professional Executive Director and a Project Officer, supported by appropriate head office staff. At local level, regional organisations meet regularly to discuss and plan to deal with topics of mutual interest.

The project

This case study is derived from a research project funded by the Training Agency Work-Related Further Education Development Fund and carried out by BGM Consultants Ltd for the Hire Association of Europe. The project was one of a number of pieces of work funded by the Training Agency to which the Further Education Unit was granted access and afforded support.

In 1987 the Hire Association of Europe embarked on a major project to design new nationally recognised qualifications,

achievable largely through the workplace, independent of any specific educational or training process and available to all. The qualifications are based on the NVQ framework of a series of units of competence each comprising a number of competence elements together with their associated performance criteria and statements of essential related knowledge.

The project designed to explore the ways in which colleges of further and continuing education might help to meet the training needs of small businesses in a specific sector of industry. It was intended that each college would be free to choose its own approach with advice and support being available on request from the consultants and access to employers made freely available through the Hire Association of Europe.

The stated objectives of the project were to:

- explore the capability of further education colleges to provide vocational education and training to meet the requirements of a particular industry in terms of appropriate content, agreed standards and acceptable delivery arrangements;
- investigate the issues involved in the provision of flexible and narrowly targeted learning programmes for small numbers of students;
- seek effective ways of establishing practical liaison between colleges and industry, so that the requirements of the individual client could more easily be identified;
- identify the learning and assessment functions required to be delivered and the potential roles which might be undertaken by the colleges and the industry.

The co-operation of the Hire Association in the case study was sought for a number of important reasons. The industry, through the Association, has for many years, been conscious of the need to ensure the highest possible standards of service to its customers. This led to considerable interest in training as an important means to that end. Until recently there was no appropriate qualification or custom-built training system available to the industry.

The new qualification, certificated by the City and Guilds, which was used as the basis for this study is concerned with the servicing and repair of a wide range of power-driven and manually operated equipment. Often this is conventional equipment used in other industries, including internal combustion engines, electric motors, transmission systems, hydraulic and pneumatic systems, cutting, welding, drilling and grinding equipment, as well as earth-moving and lifting equipment such as is used in the construction industry. A variety of skills are needed which cross the conventional craft boundaries to produce a multi-skilled operative with a knowledge of all these systems and the ability to apply that knowledge to small plant items.

It was thought that colleges with existing training facilities based in engineering and electrical work might offer a significant contribution to the training needs of the hire industry because of their experience of offering learning programmes in these areas. It was also intended to explore the extent to which existing syllabus material might be used or adapted to meet the requirements of the Hire Association system.

A further consideration was that, although the hire industry's commitment to training is high, facilities and resources vary widely from company to company. The larger multiple units with central workshops usually employ a number of skilled fitters whereas the small independent unit might typically employ one skilled fitter in the workshop and three or four other employees, some of whom might be able to carry out a number, but by no means all the tasks in the workshop. It was thought that these differences might generate different requirements of colleges both in terms of the content and mode of delivery of learning programmes.

The study is not as comprehensive as it might have been since the twelve month timescale prematurely curtailed the examination of the opportunities and problems encountered. It should be regarded as a 'snapshot' involving a relatively small sample but serving to highlight a number of important issues. Not the least of these would be concerned with the viability for colleges of further education of providing adequate training for employees in small businesses, particularly where the

industrial sector is itself relatively small and can offer only a limited market to training providers.

Another important issue is that of college/industry liaison, and, in particular, the examination of the ways in which this might be successfully achieved, so that both parties maximise the effectiveness of the contact.

Colleges and the industry

Making the contact

As part of the study, the Association provided each college with a list of members and an offer of introductions to the appropriate regional chairpersons who had been briefed to expect such a contact. Reference to the study appeared in several trade press articles and it was discussed at regional meetings which the Hire Association of Europe Project Officer attended, but it was made clear that the onus for making the contact rested with the colleges.

One college sought an invitation to a regional meeting and discussed with members their needs and how the college might help in meeting them. Cost factors were also discussed in an effort to demonstrate the need for college cost effectiveness and to explore the boundaries of what might be acceptable to the industry. Employers in discussing this approach have emphasised the need for follow-up by the colleges just as they would follow up any business leads in their own field.

Another college decided to build on established contacts in the Association's regional organisation to discuss with the regional chairpersons local needs and how these might best be met. The successful establishment of a personal relationship and rapport between the industry and college staff appeared to be an important factor but may depend on personality as much as goodwill. It is probably significant in-depth commercial and industrial experience.

Both of the colleges described above have made considerable efforts to try to establish close personal contacts between individual staff members and local employers in the industry.

Both approaches appeared to be effective, but college staff recognised that the relationships were relatively new and they would need consolidation.

Considerable effort was made by one college to invite employers to a meeting to discuss the Hire Association initiative and how the college might assist in this. For various reasons the offers of regional contact made by the Association were not taken up and invitations went out from the college to a mailing list of Association members and Yellow Pages entries. The letter of invitation was informative and referred specifically to the new qualification which would be available to the industry. In spite of telephone follow-up, the response was not good, with an attendance of eight people representing five companies. This does not denigrate the college's efforts, but the experience offers an interesting contrast to other approaches.

First contact by a college with an industry or with particular companies is of vital importance and can colour all that comes afterwards. Making effective contact is often difficult and almost always time-consuming. If the contact is to be fruitful, it must be made in the right way compatible with industry's expectations. Contact must be made at the right level and through the right channels. The problem often is to know what these are.

The most effective initiatives appeared to be those which used the Association's organisational structures and goodwill to establish personal contacts through Association meetings or visits by employers to the college. Where attempts had been made by colleges without the Association's help to call together meetings of employers to discuss training needs, there was only a limited response.

These experiences reinforce the suggestion that contact with industry is likely to be most effective where existing industry structures are used and the goodwill of the industry as a whole is used to gain access to the individual companies. The difficulties of contact even in a well-organised industry suggest that there could be even more difficulty in less well-organised sectors. Colleges also need to be well organised to provide prompt and flexible responses to industry needs to make the most of the opportunities presented.

Employers involved with the study tended towards the view that colleges still did not really understand industry's problems. They said that, in general, neither style nor learning provision had changed to any marked degree, although they recognised that there were notable exceptions. There was a feeling that often colleges did not share employers 'get up and go' attitudes and employers found it difficult to understand when a college appeared to turn away work or did not quickly follow up leads and offers of work.

The colleges, on the other hand, appeared to vary in their attitudes towards their potential clients. This variation ranged from 'We have the facilities, what we need are the students' to 'We will meet industry needs however and wherever is most convenient to the client'.

Both industry and colleges recognised the need for rapport and mutual understanding and the importance of effective communication in achieving it. However experience has shown that this state cannot be achieved overnight and time is necessary to allow these relationships to mature.

Identifying training needs

Four colleges experimented with the use of questionnaires as a means of identifying the employers' training needs. One college interrogated a general country-wide data base derived from responses to a circulation of approximately 15,000 employers of all types. This proved to be of no value in identifying hire industry training needs. The college then turned to a more specific questionnaire sent to about a fifth of this number but directed at local industry. This too was disappointing in that it produced few returns and only some of these referred to training as an important issue. The colleges have now adopted a more industry-centred approach, directed at Hire Association membership lists and Yellow Pages.

The general low response rate to questionnaires is well known and one college tried to overcome this by offering a questionnaire to a meeting of employers. Somewhat better results were achieved. In general, it would seem that the complexity, length and design of the questionnaire need to be carefully considered.

A very detailed questionnaire was designed by one college. It covered employee numbers in the various employment categories, extent of the training budget and expected training costs. It attempted to identify preferred methods or provision and an assessment of what employers perceive as currently available. It then went on to list over a hundred competences and asked employers to indicate against each their preference for one of four alternative means of delivery. This very comprehensive approach has been offered to the Association as a model of what might be circulated nationally to obtain detailed information from members.

A national survey of needs might usefully be carried out by the Association with local supplementary activities. This would supply compatible information for all regions and make it possible for the Association to develop an effective strategy and to act as a co-ordinator and clearing house for its members' training and assessment needs.

Overall, experience tends to reinforce the view that response rates to 'cold' questionnaires are normally low even when attempts are made to target a specific population. Where an industry is not well organised, targeting and following up questionnaires presents its own problems.

In attempting to obtain information from employers, questionnaires were used and meetings were held as described above. It became apparent that face-to-face contact was much more effective than the written word and both college staff and employers were comfortable with this approach. Some college staff made efforts to invite employers to the college to look at facilities and discuss ways in which they could contribute to training in the industry. This appeared to be a valuable initiative, but it might be equally profitable for college staff to spend some significant time on employers' premises, observing and gaining a better understanding of their operations and needs.

It is important to achieve a balance between what the questioner would ideally like to know and what the respondent is likely to be prepared to disclose. Language difficulties can also arise where commonly used terms may be understood in one way by the world of education but not always interpreted in the same way by employers.

Colleges may wish to take account of the Association's experience of sending questionnaires on other topics to its members. This leads to the conclusion that such questionnaires are better handled centrally by the Association itself and, given good design and some degree of follow-up by the staff, can produce acceptable response rates and useful information when directed at the right people. Identification by colleges of industry's training needs and the understanding of its problems will be time-consuming and difficult.

Advertising and marketing

Two colleges sent a proposed programme as a mail shot to prospective clients. This was not very effective in terms of the response elicited but it is difficult to establish whether this was because of presentation quality, the targeting or inherent reluctance to respond to mail shots. Current economic climates may also have a noticeable influence on training activities, which are often seen in the short term as an avoidable overhead. Certainly there was little response to either of the short-course programmes circulated, but it may be significant that they did not appear to be directly tailored to the Hire Association members' needs. Neither programme made reference to the Hire Association of Europe, nor would it be possible to know from the information given which units of competence the programme would deliver or even whether the programme was compatible with the units and elements of competence used by Association members.

One college has taken advantage of the Hire Association competence-based approach to design a series of short courses. These are intended to address specific units of competence and will be advertised in such a way that employers will be able to see precisely what each course will deliver. They will therefore be able to make a selection based directly on their needs, in the expectation that those needs will be fulfilled.

Presentation of information is an important factor in attracting the attention of people who normally receive heavy postal deliveries much of which is directed towards selling them something. A syllabus or course proposal is more likely to attract attention if it is well designed and presented and

includes only that factual information which will be important to the reader.

In offering a course to a potential market, it is important to identify the needs of that market and to make the offer in appropriate terms. Competence-based systems provide employers with the means to specify requirements more clearly and precisely. There should be clear and detailed reference to purpose and contents in any publicity material intended to attract the attention of employers and it should clearly describe what the student is expected to be able to do at the end of the course: words like 'appreciation of' or 'knowledge of' have little meaning or relevance.

All those taking part in the study agreed that a more effective approach would be based on an agreed and centrally controlled marketing operation with the Association as its focal point. It was suggested that the Association might set up a national promotion campaign with appropriate publicity materials and activities. Local publicity material could be provided for colleges who would use this and their own materials to carry out an agreed local strategy in support of the national initiatives. Association members believed that any promotion initiative should be based on wider issues than the immediate competences to be achieved. It should focus on the hire industry as a whole, with emphasis on qualifications and possible career structures within it and the potential for transfer to other related sectors.

The development of a marketing strategy should precede any advertising since the strategy itself will target the advertising and provide its design brief.

Designing the learning programme

Accessibility

It is important to design learning programmes to meet identified needs; and it is equally important that the delivery methods be suited to the opportunities and constraints facing the user. Where employees work in groups of two or three, the absence of one is more significant than in larger groups. This means that where the larger organisation may welcome a two-day course during working hours, other smaller units prefer the evening or weekend session.

Although the time-scale of the study did not allow exhaustive examination of personalised learning programmes, there are already signs that colleges are considering innovative approaches to the problems of small student numbers and flexible delivery systems.

In some cases, for example, the competence unit concerned with servicing two-stroke engines may be covered by an existing learning programme designed for another industry, supplemented by learning materials. It may not yet be in a competence-based form, but colleges are examing the relevance and adequacy of existing provision and materials and determining what amendments or modifications might be necessary in order for it to fit the requirements of the new client group.

In addition, colleges are examining how learning programmes might be restructured to allow students access to a specific unit or series of units without the need to undertake the whole of an existing course.

Another college is engaged in a careful examination of the competence units so as to put together a series of suggested

programmes which clearly address certain units of competence defined in the HAE system. This will enable the college to advertise a series of short courses directed precisely at specific areas and offering clearly defined outcomes recognisable by employers. The methods of delivery will not be decided until the college knows for each course the delivery requirements of the students and their employers.

At least one college is currently examining existing distance learning material to identify any which may be appropriate or may be adapted to HAE needs. In doing this it also intends to identify any other areas which might be approached by this method. The college is well aware of the possible implications for its own role as a provider and manager of distance learning programmes and it is recognised that, because of their specialised nature, these activities may not be appropriate in all colleges.

Content

In the early stages of the study some conceptual problems were apparent. There was some difficulty in distinguishing between training systems and assessment and accreditation frameworks which are independent of any specific training approach. This led to initial misunderstandings about the role of the colleges and some were under the impression that they were being asked to co-operate with the others in producing a total programme, including an assessment specification. These problems quickly disappeared but are likely to occur in many similar situations. They underline the need to spend time on careful briefing to ensure that all understand the need to provide flexible learning opportunities to support an assessment and accreditation system based on free-standing units of competence.

Experience in this study has provided some evidence that there remain traces of the attitude which seems to suggest to industry that the college knows what is best and cannot understand why the industry does not want it. It may be extended to include attempts to design a learning programme using those materials which already exist regardless of their relevance, rather than customise and adapt to meet the client's

demands. This was demonstrated early in the study when there were suggestions that it might be possible to 'slot them (trainees sponsored by the industry) into existing courses', apparently without making any attempt to meet the special needs of those trainees.

There were also early examples of colleges offering their own established provisions which were not being sought by potential clients. In some cases, courses were offered without consultation with the hire industry and were received by employers with little enthusiasm. On other occasions, colleges offered instructor-training and training in assessment. The former were seen as irrelevant and the latter were unnecessary since this was done by the Hire Association.

The nature of the qualifications under consideration and the assessment method used concentrate on only those elements of knowledge essential for the successful completion of a task to a given standard. The knowledge may be inferred from performance or, if this is not possible, it may be tested separately. The important factor is that only essential knowledge is called for. This may cause some difficulty in design when the boundaries become blurred between what the trainee must know and what the programme designer thinks would be helpful knowledge.

Customisation

Attempts are being made to allow students to attend short sections or units of a longer course in order to achieve certain competences. Although these activities are at an early stage, there are indications that colleges will be able to take advantage of the clearer learning specification from employers to offer a variety of designs to meet their needs. It also allows flexibility to cater for the needs of both parties in terms of delivery and possibly of costs. Colleges are exploring a range of options which include parts of other existing syllabus material, the use of specialist-equipment-manufacturers' manuals and material already published by the Association itself, notably concerning matters of health and safety.

However, entry – even if appropriate – into an existing course, with its pre-established social and behavioural norms,

of a small group of new students on a temporary basis needs to be handled carefully. There will be important implications for the relationships within the group and this will require skilful management. Work-based qualifications are attractive to mature workers as a means of establishing the validity of their experience. The longer college-based courses often include a high proportion of younger people and thus the age gap may compound the problems of temporary entry.

The problems arising in the design area appear to be conceptual or based on traditional attitudes and it is important to deal with these at an early stage in any similar initiative in order to achieve a clear and common understanding of what is required.

Delivering the learning opportunities

When and where

Most of the hire industry is made up of small units, many employing only four or five people on one site, whether they are single businesses or single units of larger businesses. In a four-person unit, one person away for training for one day represents 25% of the workforce absent and in the short term can be seen as absence which is unacceptable. This has important implications for the way in which training may be provided. It places more emphasis on their need for very short and specific courses directly related to the competence units recognised by the industry. It also leads to a consideration of when and where short courses should be offered, bearing in mind that the hire centres, like retail outlets, are usually open for six days a week.

Some of the colleges involved are actively considering the viability of offering short, one-day courses on Sundays to local groups of trainees, possibly on employers' premises. In the past certain larger employers have done this successfully for their own staff and there appears to be no reason why the principle cannot be extended to groups of small employers within reasonable travelling distance of each other.

On the job

Competence-based systems allow much of the skill and knowledge to be acquired and assessed on the job and employers can be precise about what can and cannot be delivered in the work situation.

Thus the focus of the learning programme moves from the traditional approach, in which much of the formal learning is done at the college with application in the workplace. It replaces it with an emphasis on the college as a facility to supplement what is learnt at work or as a place where specialist areas can be dealt with which are not normally available in the small-unit workshops. Considerations such as these are important not only in the delivery of learning but also in the original design and the quality-control mechanisms applied to the final outputs.

Integrating workplace and college learning

A potential problem in providing learning opportunities of this sort is the fragmentation of the learning. The concept of 'bolt-on' courses to supplement on-the-job learning is unlikely to hold good unless the students can perceive some coherent pattern or overall framework within which they can work towards the desired qualification. In a situation where people work in small scattered units with limited training resource and managerial support, it will probably be difficult to provide this framework. This problem needs to be looked at and some form of industry/college planning and support mechanisms developed.

Approved status

There is a limit to the size of the potential market offered by hire industry employees. There is concern about the number of colleges which might, in the future, offer these learning facilities. There are important cost implications here for it can be argued that, if there are too many colleges involved, the market-share of each will make provision uneconomic for all. In discussion, the colleges suggested that a solution might lie in a small number of HAE-approved colleges each taking on agreed areas of provision.

Approved centres would service the country, perhaps developing residential or outreach facilities, as appropriate, with the possibility already referred to of using employers' premises.

Equipment and facilities

To provide realistic training, the colleges need access to appropriate equipment and facilities. Members of the Association were quick to offer this. New equipment was offered to ensure that training was up to date. Older, well used or defective equipment was also offered so that students could experience the realities of servicing and repair. An alternative which has been found attractive in other situations is for the trainees to bring their own pieces of equipment for repair.

Although the employers were enthusiastic in offering colleges support and equipment, their enthusiasm was not always reciprocated by the college.

In the case of specialised equipment, manufacturers appear to be helpful, and there have been examples of colleges successfully inviting manufacturers' representatives to contribute to courses at no cost to the college.

There is no reason to believe that willingness to help is confined to the hire industry, although access may be more difficult in industries which do not have a similar national and regional organisation. However, experience shows that offers of help from industry should be followed up quickly and vigorously in order to maintain enthusiasm and co-operation.

Cost

Costs are an important factor to both industry and colleges. There appeared to be wide variations in the costs by the colleges although all claimed to be based on the principle of complete-cost recovery.

Colleges are now in the market-place and subject to all its forces. It will be necessary to consider the 'competition', which may be in the form of other colleges or industry itself. There are also independent training providers who may be able to offer certain types of training at lower costs, as well as equipment manufacturers who are often willing to provide free training as part of their marketing strategy.

Discussions with the colleges concerning costs, suggested that capital costs could be reduced by taking up offers of equipment loan or the use of employers' premises. Equipment

manufacturers have been shown to be willing to provide visiting trainers at no cost and, if the situation can be effectively managed so as to avoid undue bias towards a particular manufacturer, it can provide another means of cost-reduction.

Discussions with colleges and industry underlined the importance of accurate costing and of making efforts to reduce costs by whatever means possible.

There is a need for close co-operation between colleges, employers and equipment manufacturers to identify appropriate methods of provision which will benefit all parties.

The role of the college

There are a number of role options open to colleges. These should be based on a clear understanding of what training can best be provided by industry and what are the limitations of the workplace as a learning environment. It is also essential to identify what learning can best be delivered away from the workplace and how and where colleges can contribute to that learning.

It is important to consider cost/service comparisons as well as possible competitors for the provision of the service.

As a supplement to on-the-job training

At least one of the colleges in the study is considering a range of flexible learning provisions which could be used to complement and support on-the-job training. This requires careful organisation to ensure that the provision is compatible with the requirements of the industry's assessment system and that it makes it easier to achieve the units of competence being sought.

As a manager of learning and assessment

The Hire Association system provides trainee work books and clearly stated units of competence which can be used as the basis for training design on the job. There still remains the need for college provision to be integrated and not presented as a series of 'bolt-on' items. This has implications for both parties. It highlights the need for management to ensure that the learning takes place in a systematic way in order to avoid the dangers of fragmentation referred to earlier. Indeed, it offers

colleges significant opportunities to manage learning provision on behalf of employers or groups of employers and would give a college an important centralising and co-ordinating role, requiring close liaison and understanding between the parties involved.

As the organiser of consortia of employers

It was suggested by members of the Association that small companies in a given locality might wish to form consortia for the purpose of sharing training activities and resources. Some form of organisational structure, however informal, would be needed and considerable work would be involved in providing an appropriate framework, in identifying training needs and planning and overseeing the training and assessment arrangements.

There is no reason why colleges should not seek to adopt the role of training managers to consortia such as these.

New skills

All the activities described carry with them the need for general management, training and individual coaching skills in an industrial environment, as well as a detailed knowledge of the industry's activities, characteristics and culture. If colleges seek to adopt the roles outlined above, it is probable that college staff will require support in developing the appropriate range of skills to cope with a new environment and new activities.

The college as assessment centre

Often it was found that colleges had equipment and facilities which could be used for assessment purposes and offer a valuable addition to assessment opportunities in the workplace. For example, a college with several pieces of the same equipment, such as small diesel engines, could offer to set up a series of fault diagnosis tests much more easily than a company workshop waiting for examples of a particular type of fault. An extension of that situation could lead to the managing

of assessment procedures by approved colleges on behalf of the Association. Given that the assessment facilities are readily available, college staff would only require briefing in their use and in the supporting administrative procedures.

Supplying training for other training providers

Another role option could be close co-operation with independent training providers, as well as the provision of training on employers' premises. The independent providers of training work on behalf of employers or groups of employers to provide the central training resources offered in large companies by the training manager and staff. Because they manage large numbers of trainees, independent training providers can usually offer long-term planning.

TECS

The development of the TECs offers a local dimension with important possibilities for college industry co-operation. With their ability to collect and disseminate employment and training intelligence, the TECs could provide a valuable source of planning information for colleges and employers. It may be that there is an important role for colleges in managing and interpreting that data on behalf of groups of employers.

Whatever the preferred role, it is important that colleges consider all options and adopt a clearly defined policy and strategy. It is also important to ensure that college staff are equipped and trained to take advantage of these opportunities.

The role of industry

Certain activities or systems such as working procedures, paperwork routines or personnel practices are often unique to a company. Individual companies in any industry are in the best position to provide training in those areas. In more generalised areas of skill and knowledge the company can often provide training directly on the job, whereas colleges can provide similar training but outside the work environment. Industry representatives in the study were conscious of the need for training which truly reflected the realities of the workplace. They would probably seek outside assistance only where in-company training resources were inadequate or where they felt that a particularly important specialised aspect of the work could be best dealt with in the college environment.

The industry in this study was well organised and therefore easily accessible by the colleges. The Association, with its regional organisation and in its role as Lead Industry Body, is well placed to identify skill shortages and training needs and to co-ordinate the efforts of their members in meeting them. This represents an important role for any industry organisation, intending to make best use of national training resources since it provides a focus for colleges and other providers of training, and offers a means of access to companies in the industry.

Without a central industrial organisation, college contact is likely to be piecemeal and the outcomes variable and uncoordinated, underlining the importance of close contact with an effective central body, whatever that form may take.

Summary and conclusions

Many aspects of the study demonstrate the importance of effective contact and understanding between industry and colleges. This is not always easy to achieve even in an industry which is well disposed to training and has an organisation offering easy access to its employer members. There will be considerably more difficulty for colleges in making and maintaining contact in less favourable circumstances than those found in the study.

Experience in this study has shown that colleges need to organise to maximise the effectiveness of their industry contacts. This might involve the establishment of active arrangements for consultation with local groups of employers or national industry sectors. It may require greater flexibility to provide multi-discipline training and this implies the need for a high level of internal communication and co-operation within colleges.

There are also considerable opportunities for valuable inter-college co-operation and exchange of ideas. The study involved only five colleges for a short period but there were significant signs of developing interaction and co-operation. It may be that this process could be encouraged to the mutual benefit of all.

Another important issue is concerned with the extent to which competence-based qualifications help to articulate training needs. The study was carried out in a situation where it was necessary to achieve a given combination of clearly defined units of competence in order to achieve a qualification. The standards on which the competences are based were derived from and defined by the industry itself as were the associated performance criteria. Discussions with employers indicated that, by reference to the units and elements of

competence, they were able to identify more clearly and describe more accurately what standards of performance they required of their employees.

Equally important was the fact that employers felt that employees could be assessed against the standards and plans for improvement through training made where necessary.

The competence base had a considerable influence on the way in which some colleges approved the problem of learning design and delivery. It also allowed employers and colleges the possibility of working to detailed specifications and of measuring results against clear output requirements.

When marketing is considered, one important issue concerns the size and structure of the market. Potential clients from employees in the hire industry are relatively small in numbers, but the skills which they need are often found in tasks carried out in other occupations and industries. Theoretically it should be possible to identify these skills where they occur in existing courses designed for other occupational sectors. Alternatively, it would be possible to provide a course of the common skills for people in several industry sectors with option-provision directed at specific sector needs. Until more industries adopt an effective competence-based approach to skill definition, a problem will lie in the ability of colleges to identify relevant programmes or be able to package them in the form required.

As described earlier, attempts are being made to provide courses offering competence units which have currency in other industries and therefore offer a wider potential market. The establishment of the NCVQ data base will provide valuable information about units of competence having currency across a number of industries.

Experience of the colleges and the Association has demonstrated the need to study carefully the size and structure of the potential market and for each to identify their own niche based on a rigorous appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses and those of their competitors. Considerable time and effort will be needed to establish effective working relationships with employers. Taking this factor into consideration with the size of the potential market, colleges should decide what role(s) they wish to adopt, if in fact the colleges wish to become involved in this particular market.

Further Education Unit

Board of Management

Objectives

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